

**FALL  
BOOKS**

LOUIS BEGLEY on Primo Levi  
DAVID LEHMAN on Dashiell Hammett  
JESSICA LOVE on Sherry Turkle

**PLUS** Reviews by: T. M. Luhrmann,  
Verlyn Klinkenborg, Andrew J. Bacevich,  
and Thomas Chatterton Williams

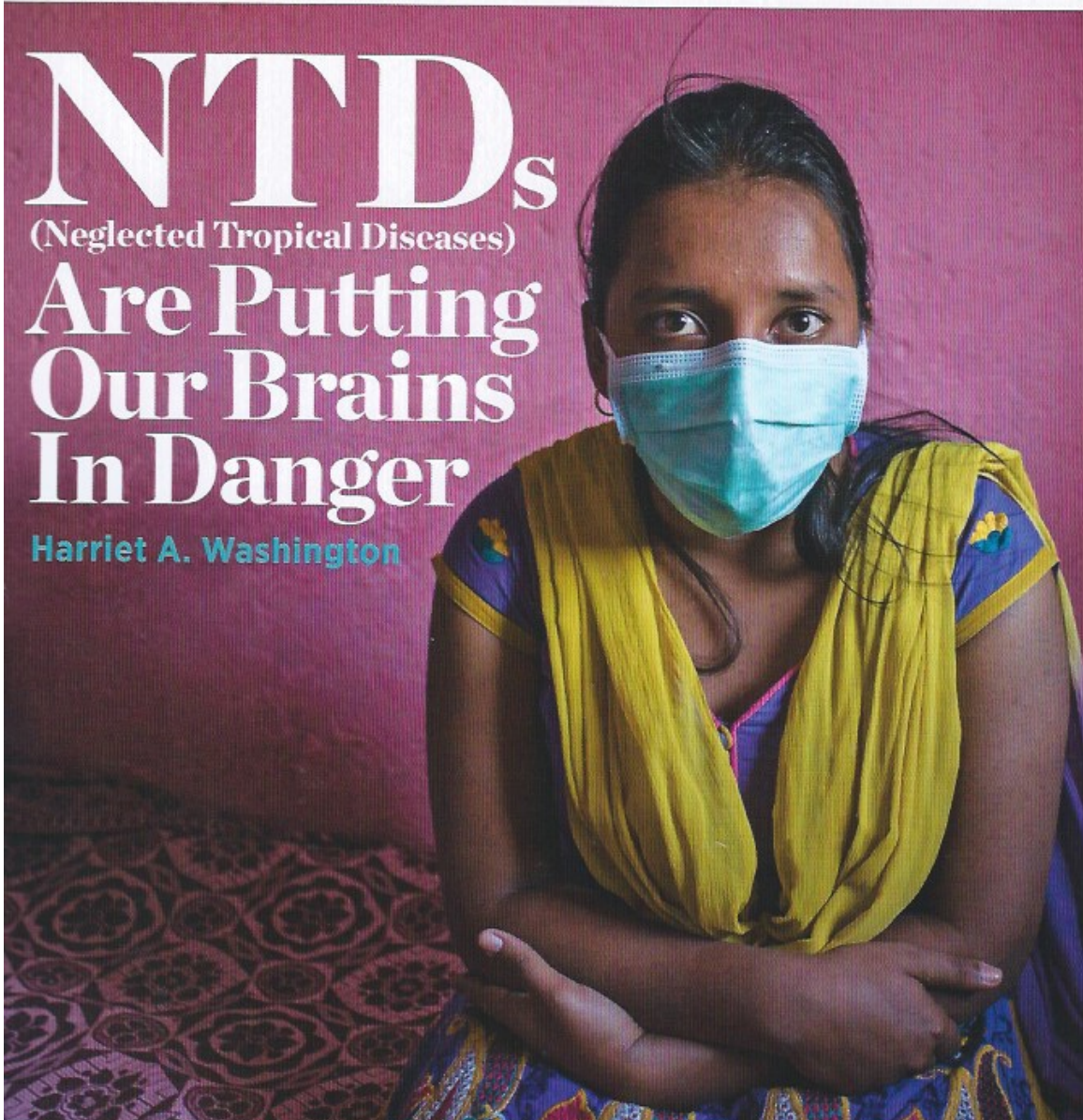
# *The* AMERICAN SCHOLAR

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## NTDs (Neglected Tropical Diseases) Are Putting Our Brains In Danger

Harriet A. Washington





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# ARTS

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## ARCHITECTURE

# Reimagining Suburbia

What if the world's greatest architects began looking beyond the city limits?

AMANDA KOLSON HURLEY

RENZO PIANO MAY BE the most urban, and urbane, of great architects working today. He made his name in Paris in the 1970s, when he and Richard Rogers designed the Pompidou Center, a machine of a museum bristling with exposed steel and pipes. The “inside-out” building provoked howls from Parisians at first, but the Pompidou soon became a beloved landmark and helped revive the then-ailing Marais district. Since that time, the Italian architect has designed a master plan for the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. He has built an airport in Osaka and the tallest skyscraper in London. He has left elegant, precisely crafted museums and galleries in Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, Chicago, San Francisco, and New York. So critics did a double take last year when Piano announced that he was designing a new shopping center in San Ramon, California. Renzo Piano—winner of the Pritzker Prize, architecture’s Nobel—was designing a *suburban mall*?

The project didn’t come out of nowhere. Recently, Piano assigned six young designers

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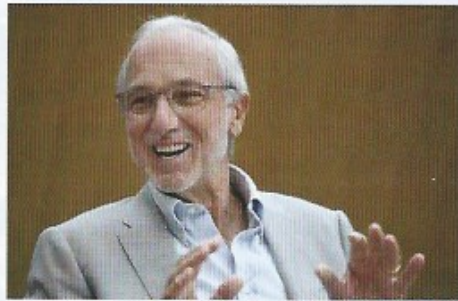
on his staff to work on a suburban renewal initiative. The research project, which is called G124 and is sponsored by the Italian government (in Italy, Piano is an honorary senator-for-life), studies experimental and low-cost ways to repair the frayed tissue of cities' outskirts. In a recent interview with National Public Radio, Piano explained that the suburbs are where most people live, yet they are badly neglected. Suburbs "are not beau-

tiful, of course; they are not well treated," he said. "But they are the future of the city; or they are the city of the future, if you prefer."

When the first suburbs were built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was architects and landscape architects who shaped them. The English architects Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin designed proto-suburban "garden cities" in the Arts and Crafts style, on the utopian model set forth by the reformist thinker Ebenezer Howard. In America, Frederick Law Olmsted planned the early suburb of Riverside, Illinois, its curving, leafy streets becoming a defining suburban feature.

When it comes to buildings themselves, arguably the most influential house of the 20th century, Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, is in Poissy,

*In his minimalist design for a mall in California, Renzo Piano (left) "seems to be pushing at suburban building types, seeing how far he can bend them."*



NICOLAS BOUJET AND VINCENT BARUE. PORTRAIT: ERIC FEFERBERG/AFP/GETTY IMAGES





a suburb of Paris. The largest collection of Frank Lloyd Wright houses is in Oak Park, Illinois, just outside Chicago. Wright also dreamed up Broadacre City, a suburban Jeffersonian paradise where every man could have a car and a whole acre to himself—the better to avoid his fellow Americans.

After the Second World War, U.S. government housing subsidies for returning veterans combined with new highway construction to fuel a massive wave of suburban sprawl. But architects were left out of the building boom. Commercial homebuilders shaped the new suburbs instead, bulldozing large tracts of land and framing up house after house with assembly-line speed, rarely deviating from the same few floor plans. To make sure their buyers could get government mortgages, the builders followed strict guidelines from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Established vernacular styles such as Cape Cod and colonial revival were favored; the FHA frowned on modern design as too novel for the home-buying public and a risky investment.

Thus excluded from suburbia's second act, the architectural elite kicked against it in protest. In his 1964 book, *God's Own Junkyard*, Peter Blake, the editor of *Architectural Forum*, attacked the new suburbs as an unholy mess, "interminable wastelands dotted with millions of monotonous little houses on monotonous little lots and crisscrossed by highways lined with billboards, jazzed-up diners, used-car lots, drive-in movies, beflagged gas stations, and garish motels." Aesthetic revulsion mingled with a snobbery toward the people who lived in such places, the petit-bourgeois "organization men" who aspired to nothing more than owning a tacky home. For the critic Lewis Mumford, American suburbanites were mindless conformists, "people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers ..." You can almost hear the shudder run up his tweed-jacketed spine.

Yet leading midcentury architects worked for the organization men when they could. Gordon Bunshaft designed a bucolic campus for a life

insurance company in suburban Connecticut, and Eero Saarinen did the same for Bell Labs in New Jersey. Philip Johnson, Richard Neutra, Louis Kahn, and many other fine architects built custom homes in suburbia. A few, collaborating with progressive homebuilders, gamely tried to reengineer the whole model of tract development. Hollin Hills, a modernist subdivision in Northern Virginia designed by Charles Goodman, offered stylish and affordable homes set in a lush landscape. Although more successful than the FHA would have predicted, such experiments were too uncommon to shift the market.

Today, architects' attitudes to suburbia tend to split three ways. The first and most common attitude is indifference. Architects are largely urban creatures, working for urban developers and museum boards and teaching in urban architectural schools. For decades, they have tried to fend off inner-city decay using strategies good (historic preservation) and very bad ("towers in the park" urban renewal). Now that many big-city American downtowns have been revived and gentrified, architects remain as city-transfixed as ever.

The second mode, espoused by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in the late 1960s and early '70s, is an appreciation, more or less ironic, for the pop art charms of endlessly repeated little houses and the "jazzed-up" road signs that Peter Blake so loathed. Attitude number three is the anti-suburban crusade led by the traditionalist architects and planners who call themselves New Urbanists. This group wants to eradicate cul-de-sacs and two-car garages and replace them with dense, walkable urban districts that mix different kinds of buildings and human activities. Suburban sprawl is a cancer, they say, a blight.

It is hard to argue with the urgency that the New Urbanists feel. Suburbia has many problems, and ugly buildings are just the start: a debased public realm, low-quality (or nonexistent) public transportation, and road designs that isolate residents rather than connect them. Worst of all is the environmental impact: compared with city





*A study in contrasts: Levittown, New York (above), the model of cookie-cutter suburbia, and Hollin Hills in Virginia, with its modernism and lush setting*

dwellers, residents of a conventional suburb use more energy to heat and cool their homes, and drive almost everywhere out of necessity.

But even when the money is on hand for large-scale redevelopment of a suburb (and it usually isn't), rewriting the zoning code isn't enough. Great places need imaginative, contemporary architecture, too, and this has been in short supply in suburban makeovers. Many of the new ersatz "town centers" have turned out just as cheap looking and bland as the shopping malls they replaced.

Part of the problem is that developers and government officials assume buildings are for suburbs, while Architecture-with-a-capital-A is for cities. The bar has been set too low. But architects aren't exactly hastening to raise it. The avant-garde architect Charles Renfro, for instance, while talking last year about suburbia, called it "reprehensible."

To condemn suburbia in moral terms like this, to call it a cancer or dismiss its residents as gas-guzzling yahoos, is unfair to the millions of people who actually live there (your author included). It also betrays ignorance of how the suburbs have changed since the days of white flight and *Leave It to Beaver*. As American suburbs mature, they become ethnically diverse—often more so than the cities they border—and acquire layers and juxtapositions. A school moves into the shell of a Kmart; a Hindu temple abuts the golf course; informal *mercados* spring up on cracked parking lots. New places begin to develop the texture we prize so much in old ones.

Maybe suburbia is, as Venturi famously wrote, almost all right. Maybe we just don't understand how

it's evolving, the way we couldn't conceive of an urban renaissance a generation ago.

What the suburbs really need is architects who combine a sense of environmental and social purpose with respect for the suburb qua suburb. We need designers who will take creative risks to elevate suburbia, not just rail against it or pander to us with kitschy historical styles (as some New Urbanists do). Already, there are promising examples of such an approach: a deft remake of a Walmart into a community library in Texas and a small California subdivision that tightly clusters modernist houses and townhouses, to name two.

And soon we'll have Piano's San Ramon mall,



which will break ground early next year. Unlike the private tech campuses other famous architects are designing in Silicon Valley, it aspires to be a high-quality civic space. Piano hasn't dumbed down his signature style; the renderings show the tasteful minimalism for which he is known. He seems to be pushing at suburban building types, seeing how far he can bend them.

Piano's deputy, Antonio Belvedere, the architect in charge of the project, says they were determined not to create a mock Main Street with an ugly loading dock at the rear and even uglier parking garage beside it. Instead, they designed a set of sleek buildings, each with four attractive faces and no back, around a large internal piazza, to be planted with grass and trees. On the ground floor, the stores have

glass walls, windows on the piazza and the streets. Most of the parking is hidden inside the complex. As Belvedere describes it, the complex "eats the cars generated by its own demand—the car disappears into the belly of this gentle monster."

Before agreeing to work on the project, Belvedere told me, the architects asked themselves, What is the duty of an architect? Is it "to bring energy only to the most beautiful context," places such as Manhattan or Paris, "or also to improve the life of people who don't live in the cities but in suburbia?" The San Ramon center isn't quite a mall or strip mall, and it isn't a faux downtown, either; it's something new. It's Architecture-with-a-capital-A. If only more developers and politicians had some faith in it.

#### MUSIC

## When the Angry Lion Roared

Pierre Boulez and the piece that marked his breakthrough as a composer

SUDIP BOSE

THIS PAST MARCH, Pierre Boulez turned 90. That fact alone ought to give one pause—could the great iconoclast of 20th-century music, polemicist without peer, irreverent emblem of the postwar avant-garde really be entering his 10th decade? Age has mellowed the man and his rhetoric. Although his compositions can still seem brazen and challenging, Boulez the conductor has long since assumed the role of venerable elder. Back when he was at his subversive best, giving magazine interviews titled "Blow Up the Opera Houses" and suggesting that "all the art of the past must be destroyed," it might have been unthinkable that Boulez would one day make transcendent recordings of such

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late-Romantic fare as the symphonies of Gustav Mahler and Anton Bruckner. But then, time allows for fresh enthusiasms while cooling the hot-tempered idealism of one's youth.

He came of age in Nazi-occupied France, an irascible, precocious young man angry at the state of the musical world around him. In those days, according to Olivier Messiaen, his teacher at the Paris Conservatory, Boulez had the temperament of "a flayed lion," an attitude reflected not only in his writings, in which he launched acerbic barbs at anyone straying from the path of high modernism, but also in his music—his first two piano sonatas as well as two works for voice and orchestra, *Le Visage nuptial* and *Le Soleil des*